

Episode Title: Cattle Feedyard Safety, Part 1: Stop, Think, Then Act

Summary: Dr. Athena Ramos works with, and specializes in, research regarding Latino and Hispanic farmworkers. With over 20 years of experience, Ramos' work helps create healthier and more vibrant communities where everyone feels that they belong. In this episode, Dr. Ramos talks about safety and Midwest cattle feedyards – an agricultural sector with one of the highest injury and illness rates in the industry. Our next episode will continue the conversation about creating a safety climate in feedyards that prioritizes talking about communicating effectively with workers about safety.

Expert: Dr. Athena Ramos

Episode Quote:

“We think about agriculture being a 3D industry: Dirty, Demanding, and Dangerous.”

– Dr. Athena Ramos, Associate Professor, Center for Reducing Health Disparities, College of Public Health University of Nebraska Medical Center

Transcript

00:02 A. Proctor

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

Today we are going to learn about cattle feedyards in the Midwest and some safety information. The cattle feedyard sector has one of the highest injury and illness rates within the agricultural industry.

Let's meet Dr. Athena Ramos.

00:00:31 Athena

Hi everyone.

My name is Dr. Athena Ramos, and I'm an associate professor in the Department of Health promotion at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. I work in the Center for Reducing Health Disparities, as well as with the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, so we are also another agricultural health and safety center that is funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. We serve a 7-state region consisting of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, and Minnesota.

01:04 Anna

Can you describe what a typical cattle feedyard looks like?

01:07 A. Ramos

A cattle feedyard or a cattle feed lot is an animal feeding operation. A feedyard is a place where cattle are fed a ration of grains and other nutrients so that they can gain weight quickly and efficiently and eventually become beef for human consumption. Typically, the animals will spend three to six months on the feedyard before they are actually sent to a meat processing facility.

01:33 A. Proctor

What are the typical working conditions of a cattle feedyard?

01:36 A. Ramos

Cattle feedyards are outdoor operations. We're not talking about an indoor barn where you're housing animals or things like that. Typically, feedyards are large operations that are divided into pens.

Each pen will hold a certain number of animals, and operations can range in size from a couple of 100 head of cattle to 80+ thousand head of cattle.

Here in the Midwest, in Nebraska, in particular in Kansas, we have some of the highest numbers of cattle on feed in the country, usually Nebraska ranked second, and Kansas ranked third in the United States, only ranking below Texas for the number of cattle on feed.

Feedyards as I mentioned are outdoors, which means that you have to deal with a lot of weather conditions. It can be hot, it can be humid, it can be cold, it can be snowy, it can be rainy, it can be muddy. I mean you name it, and you're going to face it.

There are also a lot of demands if you're feeding animals and especially in the case of a large feedyard, a lot of animals, that creates a lot of pressure because those animals need to be fed multiple times a day, right? Think about us. As humans, we want to eat a couple times, maybe three, maybe more times per day. Animals are the same way, and so they need to be fed multiple times.

So, there's a constant kind of cycle that goes on. On the feedyard and developing the rations, delivering the rations to where the animals are, checking all of the animals each day for their health and their well-being. Also, looking at how far they've come in terms of growth for their readiness to be sent to market.

03:14 A. Proctor

Definitely not a nine to five, Monday through Friday kind of job.

03:18 A. Ramos

No, no. A lot of the people that we've talked to typically work six days a week and usually about 10 hours a day. So, about a 60-hour week, sometimes you'll work 13 days on and get one day off.

It is pretty intense in terms of the number of hours.

Agriculture is typically intense in terms of the number of hours. But when you're taking care of animals, I think that's a different level.

Cattle are a huge market, and a huge economic engine for the United States and for our area, our region of the country. They estimate that there's about \$67 billion dollars of cash receipts that are associated with the beef industry, which translates into over a trillion dollars of economic impact. So, the beef sector is really incredibly important to the United States as a whole.

04:08 A. Proctor

Oh, it sounds like it has major impacts on the economy, absolutely.

What makes feed lot workers more vulnerable to injuries occurring on the job.

04:17 A. Ramos

Feedyards are risky places. **We think about agriculture being a 3D industry: Dirty, Demanding, and Dangerous.** What makes feedyards dangerous?

One, you have a huge concentration of animals and you're dealing with these kind of all-weather types of conditions. You've got long hours that people are working, and there's kind of a constant need for recovery and a lot of fatigue and stress that are associated with that type of work and having very little time to recover outside of work, to interact with family or friends or do things that people enjoy doing to reduce that level of stress that people feel.

In a recent research project that we conducted, we found that of the Latino immigrant workers that participated. (We had 243 Latino immigrant workers who participated in this study.) We found that about 72% of people reported that they had been injured on the job. This is incredible. Almost 3/4 of the people that we talked to said they had had some sort of injury on the job.

Oftentimes these were **bruises** or **cuts** related to animal handling or the animal handling facilities like the gates or the chutes where the animals are coming through. We also did hear about **sprains, strains, needle sticks, broken bones**, issues related with **electricity** and other types of **heavy machinery**. There's a lot of different ways that you can hurt yourself. For those who are a little bit unfamiliar with agriculture, there are just a multitude of ways that you can get hurt, and feedyards are no exception to that.

And oftentimes what we found, is that training can be missing or inadequate if it is in place. We hear a lot about people watching a video, maybe being told, hey, watch that guy, do what he does, but formal training systems are often missing, especially when you think about the demographic composition of the workforce.

So, one of the things that that we've seen in other research and that we've seen through our own work is that many of the workers on cattle feedyard operations are immigrant workers. They're coming from Latin America, mainly from Mexico and Guatemala. There are some coming from other places as well.

You can imagine that coming from a different place you have different norms about how you interact with animals and how you care for animals. There's just different practices.

And when you think about the scale of production that happens here, it's very different than in a lot of other countries. So, we're talking about a large number of animals that are being housed in these feedyards, and sometimes people don't have that type of experience.

There are some formal training opportunities that are available, but a lot of times there's financial barriers to being able to access those, and so some feedyards don't have the money-- you just don't have the money, and you try to make do with what you have. They're doing the best that they can.

But we could and should be doing more and trying to make training materials and educational materials and resources more accessible, both in English and Spanish and other languages as we as we run into those, trying to think of innovative ways that we can share safety information to reduce that burden of injury.

07:40 A. Proctor

What are some safety measures in place to prevent injury in feedyards (Ideally)?

07:46 A. Ramos

One of the things that feedyard operations can do is to **make sure your equipment is in proper working order**.

You can make sure that your shop area is **clean**.

You can ensure that your workforce is adequately **trained**, that they have the information they have the **personal protective equipment** and the **resources** that they need to do the job safely.

And there are groups like, for example, our Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, as well as the ag center there in Iowa that are more than happy to be able to help and provide some of these resources and some of these trainings to feedyard operations.

So, one of the programs that we're developing here in Nebraska, it's called the **Feedyard 15**.

It's a training curriculum that's bilingual and English and Spanish, and it covers the top 15 hazards that occur in the feedyard setting.

What we've heard from workers compensation insurance carriers is that slips, trips and falls is a huge issue and there's a lot of claims that are associated with slips, trips and falls. "What can we do about that?" Well, we can clean up the shop area, we can make sure people have proper footwear. We can make sure we talk about the importance of training and safety and being present in the moment and paying attention and those sorts of things. And so, we're trying to do some of those with our **Feedyard 15** modules.

So those modules are available for free to any feedyard operation who'd like to use those. They're available as PowerPoint slides or as handouts that a feed operation could use with their team.

09:18 A. Proctor

Those are great resources.

Thank you.

09:20 A. Proctor

Are there any other safety or health concerns that workers in the feed lot industry may experience that might not be so obvious?

09:30 A. Ramos

Animal handling injuries are probably our obvious injuries, right?

I think some of the other less obvious types of health and safety concerns are related to **stress**, are related to mental health, are related, to having that ability to **relax and recover** from a day's work. There's a lot of physical strains that happen in this type of environment, but there's also a lot of mental stress that goes along with it.

As a field, we tend to focus a lot on the physical injuries that we can see-- if you have a broken bone, you have a bruise, you got a concussion. We can see all of that and sometimes the emotional stress and the mental stress that goes along with these types of occupations goes unnoticed, and I think we need to pay more attention to those sorts of things.

10:19 A. Proctor

What are your overall safety recommendations to cattle yard workers?

10:25 A. Ramos

Well, some of the safety recommendations are to **slow down. Take your time.** I know there is a lot of time pressure and there's just a lot of stress that people feel, but sometimes things don't quite have to be done so fast and what we hear a lot is people say, well, you know, I'm under pressure. I've got this time pressure that I have to do this, and I have to do it now.

But you can slow down, breathe, think about things before you actually act. And that's one of the best recommendations that we can give. Make sure your equipment is in proper working order. If you're using animals like horses, make sure that they're trained for that type of environment.

We've heard sometimes that people bring horses onto the feedyard to break them and to train them. The feedyard operation is probably not the best place to train your horse. Safety doesn't have to be difficult, right? Safety just takes time, and as many of the feedyard operators will tell us, it takes some common sense. And there's a lot of things that we can do to be prepared and to make sure that everything is safe before we actually engage in the type of activities that need to be done for the day. We recommend that people **stop, that they think, and then they act.**

11:44 A. Proctor

Thank you so much, Athena, for discussing typical workplace characteristics of feedyards. Tune back in to the FarmSafe Podcast the second part of this conversation. In the second half, we will discuss more safety considerations when working on feedyards.

12:08 A. Proctor

Listen in on the FarmSafe podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Identifying Safety Training Resource Needs](#), A.K. Ramos, E. Duysen, A. Yoder
- [Feedyard 15 Project](#)
- [CS-CASH Feedyard Resources \(English and Spanish\)](#)

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